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A struggle for recognition

The War Widows' Guild in Western Australia 1946–1975

and

Exegesis

Researching and writing an organisational history

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of
Master of Arts in Writing

by

Melinda Tognini

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February 1 2012

Abstract

This thesis comprises an organisational history of the War Widows' Guild Australia WA Inc., and an essay about the research and writing process I undertook to construct such a history. The history outlines the development, struggles and achievements of the War Widows' Guild in Western Australia from 1946 to 1975.

While many were celebrating the end of the war in 1945, thousands of war widows faced an uncertain future without their husbands. Although Prime Minister John Curtin addressed the issue of war widows' pensions as part of his Post War Reconstruction initiatives, the pension was well below the basic wage. Many war widows, especially those with small children to support, now lived in near poverty. It was under these circumstances, that Mrs Jessie Mary Vasey, the widow of Major-General George Alan Vasey, established the War Widows' Craft Guild, first in Victoria in November 1945, and then in other states.

In Western Australia, the Guild held its first meeting on 29 November 1946. During the early years, members undertook training in weaving and various crafts to supplement their meagre pensions. The Guild also opened tearooms on the Esplanade in Perth, as a form of income and as a central meeting place. For many war widows it was in meeting together that they found support from others who understood their own experiences of grief and loss.

At a state and national level, the Guild became a powerful lobby group on behalf of all war widows influencing the government on issues such as accrued recreation leave, pensions, educational benefits and health care. Many of the pensions and benefits war widows receive today are largely due to the work of the early members of this organisation. These women fought for public recognition and expression of their loss. They fought to have war widows' pensions seen as compensation for their husband's lives rather a government handout. They persevered when the organisation faced hurdles, and fought for their rights at a time when men had the louder voices and determined the rules.

The essay outlines the research and writing journey that has produced the history. It outlines the wide-ranging research I undertook for each narrative thread. This includes the writing of organisational histories; experiential research in the form of a trip to Gallipoli; archival sources such as newsletters, minutes, correspondence

and photographs; contextual history such as war literature, Western Australian history and post-war history; and oral history. I describe some of the difficulties I encountered when searching for particular kinds of information. I also discuss some of the decisions underpinning the selection and shaping of information, particularly in relation to the war widows' stories and embedding an historical context, and some of the tensions at play in that process.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- i. incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree of diploma in an institution of higher education;
- ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- iii. contain any defamatory material.

I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

Signature: _____

Melinda Tognini

Date: _____

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I have received encouragement, support, assistance and advice from many colleagues and friends in the preparation of this dissertation. I would like to acknowledge and thank all of those who have helped and supported me.

My greatest thanks and admiration goes to the members of the War Widows' Guild, past and present, who welcomed me into their midst and trusted me with their stories. I am also in debt to the children of those founding war widows who dared to challenge the status quo to improve the quality of life for thousands of women in similar circumstances. Thank you for sharing the memories of your mothers with me, and enriching the narrative in the process.

To Hazel Donald, state president, and other members of the executive committee, I am regularly encouraged by your faith in my ability to communicate the story of your organization. To Jenny Knight, Sally Carver and Anita Aitkin, thank you for your ongoing commitment to the well-being of all war widows in Western Australia, and the friendship you have extended to me.

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I would like to acknowledge the assistance of archivists at the National Library of Australia, National Archives of Australia, the Australian War Memorial and the Battye Library. I am particularly indebted to those at the National Library of Australia who are responsible for Trove, the digital archive of Australian newspapers. I am also grateful to the staff of the Edith Cowan University Library, in particular its document delivery service which enabled me to access texts and resources otherwise unavailable to me.

I would like to thank Rita Tognini and Julie Page for proofreading my work.

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Exegesis

Researching and writing an organisational history

Introduction

In 1973, Gwen Forsyth, then state president of the War Widows' Guild in Western Australia, suggested that a history of the organisation be written. The War Widows' Guild had been established after the end of the Second World War in 1945 by war widows to help others like themselves. Forsyth believed that recording the story of the organisation was important at both a state and national level. She drafted an account of the first ten years of the Guild in Western Australia, which she took to a national conference in October that year. Six years later, at the 1979 conference, it was decided that each state should collect photographs and other items of interest, as well as names and dates from Guild minutes, so that a comprehensive national history could be compiled (Forsyth, 1980).¹ Sadly, Gwen Forsyth did not live to see the publication of *No Mean Destiny* by Mavis Thorpe Clark (1986), which outlines the formation, development and achievements of the War Widows' Guild nationally. Only one chapter focuses on the work of the Guild in Western Australia. Two decades later, in 2007, Marjorie Le Souef, inaugural state president, and then again from 2000 to 2003 after being widowed a second time, recommended that a history of the War Widows' Guild in Western Australia be commissioned while there were still Second World War widows to contribute to it.

In November 2007, as I finalised my honours thesis, the Guild advertised for a writer. I was unaware of the organisation and had not considered the experiences of war widows, even though an uncle, a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) pilot, died when his plane was shot down in March 1945, just months before the end of the Second World War, leaving behind a wife and son. On Anzac Day, I thought of those who lost their lives, but not of those who mourned them. However, I completed a biography unit as part of my honours course work, in which I used a combination of interviews and historical research to write about a woman's experiences of growing up under the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. Spurred on by a sense of satisfaction in giving voice to another's story, I contacted the War Widows' Guild, applied for and accepted the commission, and elected to do this as a Master of Arts in writing.

The state branch of the War Widows' Guild commissioned me to explore the development of the organisation, highlight its key events and achievements, and

¹ The referencing format in the essay differs to the history of the War Widows' Guild. While I used the referencing format recommended by Edith Cowan University in the essay, I have elected to use the documentary-note system for the history as it is less obtrusive and more commonly used in published histories.

examine the impact of the Guild on war widows' lives. While it must be acknowledged that not all war widows joined the War Widows' Guild, the history would focus on the women who became members of the organisation in Western Australia. The executive committee and I discussed using a chronological structure, although *No Peacetime Cinderellas* by Roslyn Burge (2008), about the War Widows' Guild in New South Wales, invited the possibility of a thematic approach. Other decisions about style and structure were left open, though I indicated I would consult with the executive throughout the research and writing processes.

This essay explores the research and writing journey that has produced the narrative of the Guild's history from 1946 to 1975, which concludes with the achievement of building affordable housing for war widows. The history is, however, a work in progress, with the period 1976 to 2011 to be written after the submission of the thesis. The essay outlines the wide-ranging research necessarily undertaken for this project: sources include published histories, including those about other organisations, the Second World War and Western Australia; field work; local and national archives for items such as newsletters, minutes, correspondence and photographs; oral history; and newspaper reports. I also discuss some of the decisions underpinning the selection and shaping of information, and tensions at play in that process.

Organisational History

I struggled for some time with how to structure a history of the War Widows' Guild. At times, I felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task, the volume of data and the problems of how best to represent the experiences of individual women as well as the organisation. In *The View from Castle Rock*, Alice Munroe (2006) writes about her ancestors, using real names and details where possible, as well as the history of the locality and era in which they lived. Where information is not forthcoming, she uses her imagination to fill the gaps. In her foreword, Munroe acknowledges that 'the part of this book that might be called family history has expanded into fiction, but always within the outline of a true narrative'.

The Secret River by Kate Grenville (2005) began as a non-fiction narrative about her family history but evolved into historical fiction. Grenville received scathing criticism from historians such as John Hirst, Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen, when she apparently claimed her novel was 'a work of history sailing

triumphantly beyond the constrictions of the formal discipline of history-writing' (Clendinnen, 2006, p. 17). It is a comment Greville (2007) has been at pains to refute. 'I don't think *The Secret River* is history—it's a work of fiction', she writes bluntly (p. 66). The history versus fiction debate reignited when *Sarah Thornhill* (2011), the final in Grenville's colonial trilogy, was published.

Clendinnen (1996) argues that historians are 'bound like Gulliver to the fragmented, frustrating record of "what happened"', as they are bound by local expectations of why events "really occur". Cassandra Pybus (1996) responds by stating that the problem is less to do with the fragmented record and more to do with a 'failure of the imagination and language in the writing of history.' She says that 'both fiction and history have the same roots in narrative storytelling', a notion Hayden White (1978) explored two decades earlier. Both Clendinnen and Pybus have valid points. In writing about the War Widows' Guild, I was often frustrated by the lack of available detail, as I sought to link and explain events and evoke the women's experiences. At times, I longed to 'fill the gaps' with my imagination. The works of Munroe and Grenville suggest memoir, creative non-fiction and novels are possible ways to do this, but while I might experiment with such genres in the future, they do not meet the War Widows' Guild's expectations of this commissioned history.

I commenced a study of organisational history, a well-established form that has only recently become the focus of scholarly enquiry. Organisational histories are usually commissioned to commemorate past achievements, and their readers are primarily those with a personal connection to the organisation. However, some organisations hope that such books will generate wider publicity and interest (Brien, 2010). Australians commemorate war veterans and the war dead, but there has been insufficient attention to women who have suffered grief and economic hardship after the loss of their husbands, and who fought for the rights and needs of others like them. Many of the pensions and benefits war widows receive today can be linked to the campaigns undertaken by the War Widows' Guild in past decades, although few people, including many war widows, are aware of this. The Guild hopes that this history will encourage more widows to join the organisation, as well as raise its profile in the wider community and among government decision makers as the organisation continues to advocate for the needs of war widows.

According to Brien (2010) writers of organisational histories, particularly ones that have been 'founder-funded', might worry that the commissioner will censor

the manuscript, revising unfavourable accounts or interpretations, possibly ‘resulting in dull hagiographies of little interest or enduring value’. When Albro Martin was approached to write the history of Pan American Airways in 1976, he anticipated that his ability to interpret archival materials would be jeopardised because his work needed to be acceptable to the founder. He refused to take on the project (Durepos, Mills, & Helms Mills, 2008). After several writers undertook but failed to finish the project, a ‘favourable’ history of Pan Am was eventually completed by Robert Daley and published in 1980. Durepos et al. argue that this became:

the privileged version of the foundation of Pan Am...In the process by which a story becomes privileged, it becomes taken as fact and unquestionably as truth...all other competing versions of the story have been silenced and forgotten. (p. 75)

Approval by the War Widows’ Guild founder has not been an issue for me, as Jessie Vasey died in 1966; however, given her strong personality and opinions, I speculate that the situation may have been different had she still been alive. Of course, it was possible that interviewees and the current executive committee would disagree with my interpretation of events and people, but to date nobody has asked for content to be modified. The Guild’s executive officer, Jenny Knight, recognises the importance of including unflattering aspects of the history, such as the occasional formation of cliques that made some newcomers feel unwelcome (J. Knight, personal communication, 27 May 2012).

Western Australian historian Jenny Gregory highlights the importance of multiple versions and meanings of events in history. In *City of Light* (2003) she sets out to explore both lighter and darker aspects of Perth’s history (p. xii). Additionally, Gregory often makes explicit her sources, whether they are respected historians, eyewitness accounts or newspaper articles. *Building a Tradition* (1996a) recalls an incident in 1971, where a group of year twelve boys at Scotch College staged a strike over hair length. The headmaster called an assembly about the matter and lost his temper. Gregory writes:

The testimonies of four witnesses to the event are discussed here, and although there are some minor discrepancies in their accounts, all agree on the key elements of the strike. (p. 339)

She then recaps each version, allowing the reader to identify the similarities among them. I too was prepared to include differing perspectives where possible. In 1947, members of the Guild in Western Australia took a deputation to the Minister for

Repatriation, Herbert Claude Barnard. A newspaper report recorded that Barnard gave the war widows a sympathetic hearing, and later visited the Guild's weaving school. Marjorie Le Souef (then Learmonth) recalled a different view: 'He had the reputation for letting people speak to his back. That was easy for him as he sat on a swivel chair. For us it was the height of rudeness.' I include both versions in the written history (Tognini, 2012, p. 37).

One contentious moment in the local Guild history is the 2003 redevelopment of Forsyth Gardens. Fearing eviction, some residents opposed the project and contacted the media. Some residents' versions of events differ markedly from those of staff. However, although I sought them out, alternative versions did not often come to light, apart from minor details. Members who were unhappy with the redevelopment process have been hesitant to discuss the incident with me. One woman did so, but reluctantly and off the record. I can only speculate as to why, but possibly they did not believe that their version would be validated, or did not want to relive the situation, or to cause trouble. I intend to allude to the varying views, although this section of the Guild's history is outside the scope of this thesis.

Jessie Vasey is herself a controversial figure, as can be seen by some of her statements reported in the media, such as, 'If a woman is fond of her children and brings them up all right, then I do not care if she sleeps with 10 men a night' ('War Widows' Guild president replies to Mr Barnard', 1949). During my research, I discovered a letter her son Robert received from a Vasey Housing Association (VHA) board member in June 1966. Cec Baldwin expressed concern that Jessie Vasey was losing the support of other board members, partly due to her refusal to relinquish the role of managing director, even though it had been agreed upon beforehand. In a letter to Mavis Thorpe Clark, Angela Vasey described her mother-in-law as a domineering woman who was unable to show emotion and who tired of her grandchildren quickly. Angela Vasey acknowledges that she and her mother-in-law were often at odds, and that Thorpe Clark should use discretion when interpreting the information contained in the letter. The writer excludes many of these negative anecdotes in *No Mean Destiny*. I did not want to avoid using this material, nor did I want to use it simply to reveal 'new' or provocative information. While I write about Jessie Vasey in some detail, the focus is on members in Western Australia, and so I selected information relevant to the history. As I describe the months leading up to Jessie Vasey's death in September 1966, I discuss her unwillingness to hand over control (Tognini, 2012, p.

80) but other information, such as interactions with grandchildren, did not fit naturally into my narrative and, currently, are difficult to verify.

Brien (2010) points out that one of the biggest challenges when producing an organisational history is not about privileging one version over another but ‘how to fashion an engaging narrative from such ostensibly unprepossessing and uncontroversial documents as annual reports, meeting documentations, membership lists and financial statements.’ I sought an answer to this problem in other organisational histories, particularly those based in Western Australia. Although, there are many legitimate ways to write such a history, organisational histories that most engage me take a narrative approach, weaving in key events and developments, stories of significant individuals and a historical context.

Bill Edgar (2008) begins *From Slate to Cyberspace* with the early days of the Swan River Colony in 1829, before introducing Bishop Hale, who did not arrive in Western Australia until 1856. We then read a brief account of Hale’s life, before returning to the period in which he established Bishop’s School, now known as Hale School. Edgar plots the development of Hale School within the context of the colony’s development. He includes other well-known historical figures, such as John Forrest and C Y O’Connor, and major events such as overland exploration, the gold rush and war. I had a personal interest in the Hale School history as my grandfather was headmaster from 1961 to 1965, and my father was a student; however, the structure and style of the work encouraged a thorough engagement with the text as a whole.

Boans for Service: The Story of a Department Store 1895–1986 by David Hough (2009) opens with Harry Boan’s arrival in Fremantle in 1895, followed by the historical context of that arrival in the midst of gold fever. The second chapter flashes back to Harry Boan’s parents and his early life. Providing the story of an individual setting out to make his fortune is an effective way of engaging the reader. I had little personal connection to Boans, as I did not spend my formative years in Perth, but I was nevertheless intrigued by the story and wanted to read about Harry Boan as much as the development of the store.

The opening chapter of *A Chain of Care: A History of the Silver Chain Nursing Association 1905–2005* by Jean Chetkovich and Deborah Gare (2005) is set in 1890, when Western Australia gained responsibility for its own government. Chetkovich and Gare connect three historical aspects by the use of the word ‘fever’:

that is, gold fever; a ‘fever of commercial activity and social potential’; and the ‘fever born of illness’ (p. 1). They contrast the people who benefited from the state’s wealth with those the Silver Chain was established to assist. The chapter continues with more information about the era before introducing Muriel Chase, a key figure in Silver Chain’s history. Chapters two and three tell of the organisation’s early days by focussing on individuals who made significant contributions.

Jenny Gregory uses a narrative approach in *Building a Tradition: A History of Scotch College, Perth 1897–1996* (1996a) and *City of Light* (2003), a history of Perth since the 1950s. In her introduction to *City of Light*, Gregory explains that she has written ‘a roughly chronological narrative with chapters addressing overarching themes within that chronology’ (p. xii). She divides both texts on the basis of eras, with the major focus of each section suggested in chapter titles; for example, in *Building a Tradition*, headings include ‘Defending the Empire 1914–1918’, ‘Following the Path 1919–1945’ and ‘Preparing Citizens for a New Era 1957–1968’. Personal stories of individuals, particularly those of headmasters, are told by a mixture of narrative and quotation, and include interesting details about life in Perth at various times.

It is impossible to include every individual and every documented moment of the Guild’s history; the result would be unreadable. Thus, selection and shaping of information is necessary. I decided, after many false starts, that a chronological approach, similar to Gregory’s, would help convey the major struggles and achievements of the Guild and some of the individual journeys of the women involved. Interweaving a broader historical context would help readers understand the significance of the events and experiences described. These three areas—Guild activities, stories of individuals and historical context—became the major foci of my research and the main threads of the story.

Searching for war widows in existing literature

When I started the project in February 2008, I found little information about war widows, although I found a plethora of military histories and biographies. Some were produced by mainstream publishers, often with an eastern states focus, and include *Gallipoli* (Carlyon, 2001), *Kokoda* (Ham, 2004), *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Ham, 2007), and *An Awkward Truth: The Bombing of Darwin February 1942* (Grose, 2009). Others, usually about specific battalions from Western Australian, are

published by smaller publishers. *The Colour Patch: The Men of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion 1940–1945* (Ewen, 2003), *The Second 28th: The Story of a Famous Battalion of the Ninth Australian Division* (Masel, 2000) and *To War Without a Gun* (1980), Leslie Le Souef's autobiography about his time in a German prisoner-of-war camp, provide some details about Western Australian servicemen, including the husbands of some founding members of the War Widows' Guild.

While these histories provide useful contextual information, few mention the women and families left behind. There are exceptions such as *Wings of Destiny* (2008), Charles Page's biography of Charles Learmonth, whose widow, Marjorie, became the inaugural state president of the War Widows' Guild in Western Australia. Page writes in detail about Marjorie's romance with and marriage to Learmonth, as well as his RAAF career and death and her widowhood. David Horner's biography of General George Alan Vasey, *General Vasey's War* (1992), contains details about Vasey's widow Jessie, and extracts of their letters to each other. *The Name's Still Charlie* by Olywn Green (2010) provides a rare first-hand account of a war widow's response to losing her husband during the Korean War.

While Australian war widows have been discussed in journal articles (Smith, 1984; Cooke, 2003), and mentioned in books about social security (Kewley, 1973; Wheeler, 1989), there are few full length texts focusing on their experiences. In 1962, Jean Aitkin-Swan published *War Widows in Australia*. Her study focused on a group of widows, both war and civilian, living in New South Wales, but suggested that their experiences were representative of widows across Australia. It was another 24 years before Mavis Thorpe Clark published *No Mean Destiny* in 1986. These remained the only full length works dealing with war widows until Joy Damousi published the results of her research in *Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (1999) and *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief in Post-war Australia* (2001). More recently, the War Widows' and Widowed Mothers' Association of Victoria produced a short history of its organisation (Court, 2005) and the War Widows' Guild in New South Wales published its history *No Peacetime Cinderellas* (Burge, 2008).

In 'Women Missing in Action', Melanie Oppenheimer (2007) discusses what she believes to be the 'increasing invisibility of women in the war narrative'. She believes that women are 'positioned as passive supporters of the [Anzac] tradition, rather than as participants' and laments that in accounts such as *The Great War* by

Les Carlyon (2006) only a cursory glance is given to nurses and women in general. Oppenheimer's article, published in the *Australian* a few days before Remembrance Day 2007, concludes with a challenge to 'focus on our servicewomen and all women whose lives have been irreparably affected by war' (2007, p. 18). War widows are one such group.

Joy Damousi's research confirms that war widows have been largely absent from our histories, but, as I researched further, I discovered a group of women who refused to remain silent. Under Jessie Vasey's leadership, members of the War Widows' Guild mobilised to fight for better pensions, and medical and educational benefits: they wrote letters, met with politicians, held mass rallies and utilised the media to their advantage. Trove, a digital archive of Australian newspapers, indicates that 139 articles about the War Widows' Guild appeared in the *Argus* between 1945 and 1949. The *West Australian* published 132 articles between November 1946 and December 1949, with a further 16 appearing in the *Western Mail*, equating to an average of more than one a fortnight in this state alone, almost all of which defended the war widows' cause. These women challenged notions of passivity to become active participants in determining their own future.

Gallipoli: Reconciling personal experience with historical representation

Damousi (2001) describes the primary aims of the War Widows' Guild as being 'to make women self-sufficient, and to help them collectively sustain the memory of their husbands' heroism and by implication, their own' (p. 25). From its inception, members fought for the right to be officially represented at Anzac Day and other commemoration services. It was significant, then, that shortly after commencing my research in early 2008, the Guild's executive officer, Jenny Knight, invited me to accompany her as she chaperoned 15 war widows and two war veterans to Gallipoli for Anzac Day.

Although the War Widows' Guild advocates for and offers support to war widows of all conflicts including Gallipoli, the majority of tour members became war widows as a result of the Second World War. However some did have a very personal connection to Gallipoli; their fathers had landed at Anzac Cove during the eight month campaign in 1915. The most significant aspect of the trip was bearing witness to the women's journey as they retraced their fathers' footsteps, and I planned to write an account of the trip as part of the introductory chapter of the history. The

account would describe the Gallipoli dawn service, which is known to many Australians, even if the plight of the war widow is not, thus moving the reader from the familiar to the unfamiliar. I anticipated this to be a straightforward task but I was wrong.

Historians continually grapple with and debate methods of representation and notions of truth in history. In *Is History Fiction?* Ann Curthoys and John Docker (2010) acknowledge that ‘historians have always pondered the problem of historical truth, and have markedly differed over how to achieve it’ (p. 3). When I returned from Gallipoli and began to write about the trip, I was struck by the constructed nature of history, and the complexity of my task, particularly in relation to Anzac Day and the Anzac legend. Understanding Anzac and its contested history had implications not only for the introductory chapter, but for the rest, as commemoration and the fight for recognition was, and remains, an important aspect of the Guild’s work, and is a recurring theme in the history I have written.

The predominant images of the Anzac legend are ones of sacrifice and mateship, and the forging of a nation, ideas that were echoed by the Minister of Defence, Joel Fitzgibbons, in his 2008 address at the Gallipoli dawn service:

Here they gave birth to the Anzac legend and gave legitimacy to Australia’s nationhood...even during the darkest hours they brought larrikinism, irreverence and dry humour to one of the toughest places on earth...the word mate would undoubtedly figure prominently. No word could be more synonymous with the character of the Aussie digger.

I did not question these sentiments at the time. My original account of the trip repeated these and other images, such as the notion of brave, but naïve young soldiers. I wrote about finding Simpson’s grave and gazing along Shrapnel Valley where he would have made his way down to the beach. In fact, I mentioned Simpson three times, apparently out of proportion to other aspects of my narrative.

Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward (2007) question why Gallipoli should hold such significance given all the other battles of the First World War and ensuing conflicts. In *What’s Wrong with Anzac*, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds (2010) criticise the ‘assumption that Australian identity and national character can be conflated with the Anzac spirit’ (p. 157) and that ‘the key premise of the Anzac legend is that nations and men are made in war’ (p. 167). Their arguments are not new. From 1918 to the mid-1920s, there was disagreement over the meaning and

significance of Anzac Day, particularly about whether it warranted a national holiday, and whether it should be a day of celebration or mourning (Thomson, 1994, pp. 130, 135). Similar debate was published in the press in 1950, when War Widows' Guild founder Jessie Vasey argued that '[u]due emphasis has been placed on the misery of Anzac Day, and those who really mourn have their own Anzac Days every day of the year'. She believed that the day should be 'a day of national pride and rejoicing' (Vasey, 1950).

In 1961, Alan Seymour's play *The One Day of the Year* explored the idea that alternative views existed alongside official ones. Hughie, whose father Alf is a Second World War Veteran, resents Anzac Day, viewing it as a day of pointless marching and drinking to glorify the 'bloody wastefulness' of Gallipoli (p. 84). However, after publishing photographs of drunken ex-servicemen, Hughie senses there is 'something more in Anzac' even if he cannot see it (p. 98). When the conflict reaches a climax, with father hitting son, Alf explains that he looks forward to Anzac Day all year because '[t]hey make a fuss of y' for once. The speeches and the march ... and y're all mates ... an' everything seems all right' (p. 100). The words alter Hughie's perspective. While he still dislikes Anzac Day, he finally understands 'what they *feel* about it now' and realises there is room for multiple responses.

More recently, Alistair Thomson (1994) published *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, in which he explores the experiences of First World War veterans. The ex-servicemen he interviewed were far from uniform in their responses to Anzac Day and the Anzac legend. For some, Anzac Day provided a way to publicly 'articulate the war experience, and their Anzac identity' (p. 142), but others felt that 'the gap between the public legend and their own individual experience was too great' (p. 141). Thomson concludes that 'Anzac Day is still, pre-eminently, an ex-service blokes' day' (p. 200). If that is so, how is the collective memory of Anzac Day relevant for other groups of people? Anzac Day is problematic for those who returned home from war and died at home, that is the 'post-war dead' (Larsson, 2009), migrants, Australian Aborigines, Armenians (Manne, 2007) and war widows.

However, such remembrances, including those held at Gallipoli, had, and continues to hold, great meaning for many war widows, even though they have felt excluded from such narratives and occasions in the past. From 1948, the War Widows' Guild lobbied the Australian War Graves Commission and the RSL for official representation at Anzac Day and other commemoration services. Jessie Vasey

encouraged all war widows to attend any ceremony that remembered their loved ones and the sacrifice they had made. ‘We must never allow this country to forget the debt owed to its war dead,’ she said. ‘Not only do we remember, we must be seen to be remembering’ (cited in Burge, 2008, p. 65). The notion of sacrifice provided a framework in which a war widow could comprehend the death of her husband, and the term is used numerous times in War Widows’ Guild circulars, letters to the editor, and news reports describing the plight of war widows.

The complexity of the Anzac legend, the meanings attributed to it and the criticisms levelled at it left me uncertain as to how to write about the war widows’ experiences while showing an awareness of the myriad views and meanings. Noting some historians’ concerns, I did make some minor changes. For example, I was concerned my original draft unnecessarily perpetuated the idea of the Turks as noble foes, when I described the welcome given to us by the Turkish people and our visit to the village of Begali, the war-time headquarters of Turkish General Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. I initially reproduced Ataturk’s famous speech about ‘heroes who shed their blood on foreign soil’ and quoted Fitzgibbons who described Ataturk as a courageous leader with a ‘great generosity of spirit’. Ataturk is a controversial figure, in part for his role in the Armenian genocide, which purportedly began the day before the Gallipoli landing. I pared back the quotes from Fitzgibbon’s dawn service address and deleted Ataturk’s ode but I included the anecdote about the visit to Begali where war widow Norma Harmsworth spoke to a young Turkish widow, as it was a poignant and memorable moment of the tour (Tognini, 2012, pp. 5–6). After all, I needed to reflect the feelings and experiences of the war widows with whom I travelled; this was their history and needed to be taken into account. Thus, I begin the chapter with a description of tour member Dallas Hickman on the beach at Anzac Cove to provide an individual’s account of the visit to Gallipoli. I then discuss the construction of the Anzac legend by contrasting Dallas’ experience of knowing someone who had fought at Gallipoli with my own, which was to learn of the legend at school and via its portrayal in the media.

Adopting a collaborative approach, I sought feedback from the Guild’s executive officer Jenny Knight and state president Hazel Donald. While making several factual corrections, such as dates and places, they suggested that my account resonates with their experience of the Gallipoli tour and their attitude to the Anzac legend. For the war widows with whom I travelled, the trip to Gallipoli had great

personal significance. For the War Widows' Guild, the fight for public recognition at commemoration services has been an ongoing concern. I outline this struggle for recognition in the history, and include key moments such as the first time the national president was officially invited to lay a wreath at the 1956 dawn service in Canberra, after repeated lobbying by the organisation. The completed commissioned history will conclude with the 2010 Gallipoli dawn service where, for the first time, a war widow was among those officially laying wreaths. In recognising that the collective memory of Anzac may exclude the experience of some, it must be remembered that it gave meaning to others, even war widows, whose voices are absent from many conventional narratives.

Searching the archives

After returning from Gallipoli, I turned my attention to archival research, which began with correspondence, minute books and the *Guild News*, the organisation's quarterly magazine. These local documents provided the information necessary to create a timeline of the organisation's development over the past six decades. I used this information to write the first thread of the history: a chronology of the key events and activities of the Guild. However, minutes are limited in detail, and much of the correspondence for the first 50 years has been misplaced or destroyed. For example, the executive minutes from 15 December 1953 refer to a letter from founder and national president Jessie Vasey querying why the Perth Guild was generating less income than other state guilds. Unfortunately the actual letter, which could have supplied clues to tone, character and relationships, is missing.

When researching one of her female ancestors for her PhD, Natalie Kon-yu (2010) experienced difficulties locating archival information about 'ordinary women born in previous generations'. Kon-yu's ancestor was absent from town archives, and her family refused to divulge information, perhaps because of shame or fear of giving offence. Although almost a century separates my subjects from Kon-yu's, there are some parallels. The National Archives of Australia and the Australian War Memorial, our largest archives of military history, contain records of Australian service personnel. Occasionally a war widow joined the armed services and therefore has an army record. Generally, though, only her husband has a file, so that often the closest I came to locating information about my subjects was their listing as next-of-kin. In some cases, it was difficult to learn a woman's first name, even in Guild archives,

because it was protocol for minutes to refer to them by their married title, such as Mrs Chapman or Mrs Hiatt. According to founding member Peggy Litchfield (formerly Walker), the women addressed each other in the same way. First initials were included in the *Guild News* from 1983. Christian names were not added until 1995. The women appear to have been defined by their husband's war service and death, as the very name of the organisation implies.

At least two war widows who made significant contributions to the War Widows' Guild at a state and national level destroyed personal documents shortly before their death (A. Forsyth, personal communication, 12 December 2008; A. MacDonald, personal communication, 12 March 2010). Fortunately, Jessie Vasey did not. After her death, her papers, which include personal correspondence, news reports, photographs and documents pertaining to the War Widows' Guild, were placed in the National Library of Australia (NLA). With great anticipation, I headed to Canberra in November 2008, and again in October 2009, to observe the War Widows' Guild national conferences, and to visit the NLA's archives hoping to discover information about Jessie Vasey and the organisation's activities in Western Australia.

Accompanied by Jenny Knight, I pushed open the heavy wooden doors of the Manuscript Reading Room. Sunlight streamed through the windows and the only sounds were those of researchers turning pages and camera shutters clicking. The librarian smiled encouragingly, issued us a library card and took our yellow request forms for three of the fifteen boxes containing the Vasey family papers. When the boxes arrived from the archives, I slipped out the first folder with great anticipation. Here were papers that Jessie Vasey had held. In my hands were letters her husband had written and condolence letters following his death. What had she felt when she read those letters? Comforted? Angry? A clue came in the form of her scribbled response to a letter from Prime Minister John Curtin, but did she reply immediately, or did she give it careful consideration over the following hours or days?

I can only speculate about the answers to some questions. In other instances, I sat with the clues and questions for months until I discovered another piece of information, perhaps in correspondence, minutes, an interview or a history text. For example, the Vasey family papers contain a copy of a letter Jessie Vasey wrote to the Minister for the Army and Acting Prime Minister, Frank Forde, in 1945 (fortunately for researchers Vasey often kept duplicates of her correspondence). A year later,

when reading about the death of John Curtin, with whom she also corresponded, it occurred to me that the letter in question was dated 4 July, while Forde was acting prime minister and just days before Curtin died. The connection caused me to question whether Forde received the letter and, if he did, whether he ever responded, something I allude to in the history of the Guild: 'It is uncertain when, or if, Frank Forde replied to Jessie's letter because his attention was quickly drawn to an unfolding crisis' (p. 27).

Oral history

Jessie Vasey's personal papers are extensive. For the majority of war widows, however, few documents or archival sources exist, and therefore interviews with past and present members of the Guild became a key source of information. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (1998) argue that 'the most distinctive contribution of oral history has been to include within the historical record the experiences and perspectives of groups of people who might otherwise have been "hidden from history"' (p. ix). Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath (2009) agree, arguing that 'many stories can only be learnt via oral histories' (p. 92). Past and present members of the Guild and, in some cases, their children, knew information it would be difficult to find elsewhere. Furthermore, their personal stories and anecdotes might help me transform a series of activities and campaigns gleaned from the archives into a cogent narrative.

To build rapport I spent Mondays at the War Widows' Guild community and administration building in Menora, as members attend the centre on this day for morning tea, bingo and guest speakers. The war widows welcomed me from the outset, but some hesitated when I asked them for an interview. The reasons for this included shyness, a belief they have nothing significant to contribute and a reluctance to be recorded. Interestingly, the same women seemed happy to chat informally over a cup of tea, and this occurred with growing regularity as I continued my weekly visits.

In order to pursue research involving human subjects, whether in the form of interviews or informal conversations, the project required approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the university. To assist with this process, I joined the Oral History Association (OHA) and attended two workshops, one on ethical considerations and the other on conducting interviews. Many questions on the

university ethics form mirror the OHA guidelines. Both outline procedures to ensure the protection of data and wellbeing of interviewees. This became increasingly important as my relationship with the Guild and its members developed, and later caused me to alter the consent form for the storage of information. The original form indicated that an unedited transcript and audio would be archived at the Battye Library, but I later opted to store the material at the War Widows' Guild as I felt it provided a greater sense of security for war widows sharing personal experiences. In two cases, I added a clause to permit the storage of an edited transcript without the audio-recording, because the women told stories they wished to keep out of the public realm altogether.

I was keen to gain the women's trust, and this came with time and regular contact, but I also needed to hear the stories of elderly women, many in their eighties, before it was too late. I met Marjorie Le Souef, who initiated the project, several times but had not yet interviewed her when she passed away due to post-operative complications a week prior to our Gallipoli trip. Her vast knowledge of the Guild history was lost with her. Fortunately, Charles Page (2008) had recorded some of her personal experiences when researching *Wings of Destiny*, and she also told several anecdotes to Jenny Knight (J. Knight, personal communication, 5 May 2008; Le Souef, 2005).

In some cases, allowing enough time for trust to develop proved beneficial. One war widow initially refused an interview claiming she had nothing worth sharing. Six months later, the same woman asked if I still wanted an interview. Despite initial reluctance by some, most, if not all interviewees, seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk about their lives once conversation began. I accessed a number of interviewees, mostly the children of founding members, through the 'Can You Help' section of the *West Australian*. Most were enthusiastic about discussing their mothers' experiences, and keen to see the lives of the war widows acknowledged. I had the opportunity of ongoing contact with many of these interviewees, in person and via email, during a collaborative process of discussing transcripts and drafts, and further information and details emerged over time.

Concerns about the practice of oral history

The use of oral testimony in history dates back to Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides in the fifth century BC, but its reliability and significance have often been questioned (Curthoys & McGrath, 2009, p. 91). In his article 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', Alistair Thomson (2007) states that the rise of history as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century produced a shift away from oral history in favour of archival and documentary evidence. After the Second World War, however, there was renewed interest in the use of oral testimony, particularly when dealing with the experiences of ordinary people. From the 1960s, the concept of 'history from below' grew in popularity, and oral history was perceived to be an important tool for recording the experiences of those previously silenced, such as women, minority racial groups and the working class (pp. 51-52).

In the early 1970s, however, critics of oral history such as William Cutler, Barbara Tuchman and Enoch Powell argued that memory was subjective and unreliable because it was compromised by the passage of time, retrospection, collective memory, and bias on the part of interviewer and interviewee (Thomson, 2006, p. 53). Later that decade, proponents of oral history, including Paul Thompson who wrote *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (1978) in its defence, argued that the subjectivity of memory was a strength because it 'provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience, but also about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory' (Thomson, 2007, p. 54). Thomson (1994) explores these relationships in *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*. Rather than being a weakness, Thomson's exploration of Anzac Day and the Anzac legend is strengthened by an understanding of both ex-servicemen's war experiences and the way they construct meaning about them.

Some oral historians question whether objectivity is even possible, and suggest that 'subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible 'facts'' (Portelli, 1998). Valerie Yow (1997) agrees that objectivity, which she defines as 'a value-free process', is impossible, but that it is important to be aware of the prior assumptions we bring to an interview:

Liking or not liking, feeling repelled by difference in ideology or attracted by a shared world-view, sensing difference in gender or age or social class or ethnicity, all influence the ways we ask questions and respond to

narrators and interpret and evaluate what they say...we must view our difficulties (and I would add pleasures as well) as important data in their own right.

Yow (1997) comments that warmth between interviewer and interviewee positively influences the progress of an interview. Interviewees with whom I'd developed an ongoing relationship became more relaxed and open. Although I wish to avoid hagiography, my admiration grew as I listened to the women and the children of deceased members. My growing respect may have impacted on the way I asked questions, particularly when encouraging the children of founding members to speak about their mothers. Yow (1997) admits that when she feels affection for an interviewee, she is more reluctant to ask them difficult questions that might cause discomfort. Out of respect for interviewees' wellbeing and right to privacy, I was similarly cautious. I had requested interviews on the basis of their involvement in the War Widows' Guild, and while their emotional experiences are clearly relevant to this story, I was wary about asking an interviewee about her husband's death and her grieving process. Sometimes, I sensed that it was suitable to ask questions about grief; in other interviews, I left those questions unasked. I became aware of this hesitation and, in some cases, was able to return to them at a later date.

To promote a collaborative approach, I provided copies of the interviews and transcripts, and showed interviewees relevant sections of the thesis drafts. I used this method to build trust but it was also a way to verify information. It was possible an interviewee would veto particular information, but the benefits outweighed the risks. When I interviewed Marjorie Hasset, she confided that during her first visit to the Guild in 1975, a widow was rude to her; consequently Hasset was reluctant to attend future meetings. I wanted to include this incident to show that not all experiences were positive, but I was concerned that she would not appreciate my doing so. When we discussed the matter, her only specification was that the other woman's name be omitted. Another Guild member requested that the transcript be edited to cut repetitions and correct grammar. While this altered her expression at times, it did not affect the crucial information.

Regarding the reliability of oral testimony, official documents and other written material, such as diaries, newspaper reports and letters, can also be inaccurate. When researching my family history, I uncovered three different birthdates for one ancestor, with his age recorded incorrectly on his and his relatives' birth, death and

marriage certificates. The year of death on another ancestor's gravestone differed from that stated on his death certificate, although the day and month match. Jenny Gregory (1996a) acknowledges that memories of recent events can also be called into question, citing the way witnesses in a courtroom might recount different versions of a single event. As she points out:

oral testimony is no more unreliable or partial than any other historical source. Neither *Hansard* nor a newspaper account, sources created immediately after an event, nor even a photograph or a film of an event, can offer the historian a view of the past that is any more accurate. All depend on the standpoint – literal and metaphorical – of the author who creates the historical source. (p. xii)

Thus, cross checking information is important, whether the source is written or oral because 'memory is indeed often unreliable on exact detail' (Curthoys & McGrath, 2009, p. 92). For example, a current member told me about a tomcat who adopted the Esplanade Kiosk while the War Widows' Guild operated it. The story came to her second-hand, and as I could not verify it, I put it aside. Months later I discovered a newspaper article about a wagtail that visited the kiosk each day (HFE, 1952). The article mentioned a resident tomcat, kept in the kitchen away from the bird. The daughters of Winifred Fowler, state president from 1947 to 1957, recalled their family cat and its many litters of kittens, which were then smuggled onto the tram and into the kiosk to give away. I cannot conclude that the tomcat was one of those kittens, but the article supports the story of a cat taking up residence at the kiosk. These minor details are not directly related to the achievements of the Guild, but, in the words of Arnold Zable (2011), they 'honour the story' of those involved by contributing 'specific detail, individual images, unique characters and places' (p. 26), and they also enable comparisons; it is unlikely that health and safety regulations would allow a cat to inhabit a commercial kitchen today.

Newspapers

Newspapers are a vital source of information. Newspaper articles published from 1941 to 1975 provide details about Guild activities and individual war widows, and were often corroborated by information I had located in the archives. Initially I accessed articles on microfilm at the State Library of Western Australia but later I used the National Library website, Trove, a digital archive of Australian newspapers. Due to the possibility of factual errors, I was cautious about using newspapers as a

source of information. Early in my research, I found that reports concerning the deaths of two Guild members' husbands were inaccurate. One reported that Wilfred MacDonald, husband of founding member Gloria MacDonald, had been killed somewhere in Western Australia, although their son told me he died near Darwin. His war record, obtained through the National Archives of Australia, failed to confirm which is correct, noting only that he was accidentally killed in the field.

Another article reported that Madge Anketell's husband, Major Michael Anketell, was killed when the Japanese raided the Singaporean hospital in which he was a patient. In fact, he had earlier died of wounds sustained in battle. Interestingly, other sources are inconsistent about his date of death. Les Cody states his death as 7.45 pm on 14 February 1942 (1997, p. 171). Murray Ewen states it occurred on the morning of 13 February 1942 (2003, p. 4), and the roll of honour circular, a document completed by the Directorate of the War Graves Services and available on the Australian War Memorial website, states it as 12 February 1942, which is the day Anketell was wounded. As in the use of oral testimony, the cross checking of information is important, although the results are not always conclusive. In my manuscript I note the date Anketell was injured and never recovered, something that is not in dispute, without specifying a time and date of death, although I provide a footnote explaining the discrepancies. However, the process is more than mere fact checking. Such inaccuracies encourage speculation: did misinformation and uncertainty affect the widows, perhaps adding to their anxiety and grief?

Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath (2009) acknowledge the value of newspapers as a source of information as they 'fill you in on the everyday, on key concerns, public knowledge and contemporary debates' (p. 55). Some important incidents, such as a mass meeting held in the Melbourne Town Hall in July 1947 over poor pension rates were reported in numerous papers (see for example, 'War widows seek fairer deal', 1947; 'Families of dead soldiers "forced into slum group"', 1947; 'War widows demand basic wage as minimum pension', 1947), which provided additional details about events and activities I had previously located in the *Guild News* and minute books, including handcraft exhibitions, the opening of the kiosk, and visits by Jessie Vasey to the Guild in Western Australia.

Incorporating war widows' stories

Organisational histories are most compelling when they convey the experiences of key individuals. Early drafts opened chapter one with Jessie Vasey waiting for word of her husband's safe arrival in Cairns, only to learn of his death. The following chapter focused on VP Day and introduced the women who would feature in the history of the War Widows' Guild in Western Australia. As I introduced them, flashbacks provided background information about their lives prior to widowhood, their children, and how their husband died. I added contextual details to evoke time and place, and to establish the contrasting perspectives of those celebrating VP Day and those widowed by the war.

In *Practicing History* (1981), which discusses *August 1914*, a history of the early months of the First World War, Barbara Tuchman says:

I found that if one writes *as of the time*, without using the benefit of hindsight, resisting always the temptation to refer to events still ahead, the suspense will build itself up naturally...I wrote as if I did not know who would win. (1981, p. 21)

I adopted Tuchman's strategy, particularly in the early chapters. I knew how the story ended and readers will assume that the women become war widows, but an element of suspense could be developed by beginning the narrative in the midst of the Second World War, rather than on VP Day. Instead of introducing the women via flashbacks, I included a chapter that described the women's experiences as they waited for news of their husbands. I wrote 'as if I did not know' what would occur to evoke the tension, worry and anxiety the women endured.

Nearly all of the Guild's founding members have passed away, so it is impossible to inquire about their individual emotional responses. Thus Joy Damousi's investigation of grief, loss and emotion in the aftermath of war became fundamental to my understanding of war widows' experiences. In the past, war widows have been discussed in relation to repatriation and social security (Damousi, 1999, p. 47), and many of the Guild's achievements, such as winning increased pensions and other benefits, can be described in these terms. Damousi believes that a 'politics of grief' has often been omitted from historical narratives (2002, p. 102). After the Second World War, grief was considered to be a private matter; however, as I have indicated elsewhere in this essay, members of the War Widows' Guild were determined to have their grief 'acknowledged in public remembrances and not be lost in an understanding

of sacrifice which marginalised their own' (Damousi, 1999, p. 143). They challenged the notion of 'war widows as passive victims, who should remain silent mourners' (Damousi, 2001, p. 13); their trauma and grief motivated them to protest and campaign for greater benefits (Damousi, 2002, p. 101). Research by Pat Jalland (2006) into changing attitudes and outpourings of grief and death supports Damousi's work and provides a broader historical context in which to place the war widows' suffering. Thus, a contemporary history of the Guild needs to acknowledge the emotional journeys because a 'politics of grief' can no longer be excluded from the historical record.

Inga Clendinnen (2006) is critical of historians proclaiming to know their subjects' emotions, but Curthoys and McGrath (2009) offer a possible solution in *How to Write History Others Want to Read*. While historians cannot 'fill in the gaps the way a novelist can', there is room for speculation (p. 182). Michael McKernan uses this strategy to great effect in *Strength of a Nation* (2008). He writes in the prologue:

Worried men, not sleeping. How do I know that; how can I write that? Alright, I'm guessing. World War II was as vast in its involvement of the peoples of the world as any event in human history. We cannot possibly know the story of each person that the war touched and shaped, but we can try to enter their lives imaginatively to see how this vast and awful event involved so many of them. We can look at the lives of some individual Australians and find they might be representative of the wider body of work. We can try, and yes, that might involve a bit of guesswork. (pp. xxv–xxiv)

McKernan begins with first-person singular, moves to first-person plural, and poses a rhetorical question. He uses these techniques throughout, as well as words such as 'perhaps' and 'would' to precede an idea, for example, 'Was there any real danger at all in the Australian skies in September 1939? It would be very hard to think so' (p. 68). While I chose not to use first person point of view, except in the introductory chapter about Gallipoli, I did speculate, often in the case of an individual's thoughts or emotions. For example, when describing Rose Heath's attempt to resign as manager of the Esplanade Kiosk, I write:

Perhaps Rose Heath blamed herself for the financial difficulties because she tendered her resignation from the management of the kitchen. (Tognini, 2012, p. 60)

Using the same technique together with rhetorical questions, I contemplated soldiers landing at Gallipoli:

Perhaps fear and adrenalin protected them from the cold. At what point did these young men, many of whom had gone to war to see the world and have an adventure, realise the gravity of their situation? In the ships heading towards the Dardanelles? When the Turks sent their first flare whistling into the sky? When the first bullet tore through a fellow soldier's head while he sat in the open boat? Or when they saw, in the just-light of morning, the bodies of soldiers scattered along the narrow beach like a pod of dolphins? (p. 6)

In fiction, dialogue is a crucial narrative technique used to reveal character and emotion. In history, conversation is not so readily available, but Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath (2009) suggest we can access written and spoken words without inventing them by using short excerpts from letters, diaries, published writings, parliamentary debates, government archives, court transcripts, interviews and oral histories (p. 190). With respect to Jessie Vasey, I was fortunate. Her personal papers held in the NLA contain much of her correspondence. Hundreds of newspaper articles reported her speeches and comments, and politicians quoted her in parliament, particularly if her words were controversial. Using dialogue for other war widows was more difficult, as source materials are less readily available. At times I was able to quote from *The Guild News*. In a few instances, an interviewee relayed an anecdote that included dialogue, which I included for variety and to evoke the subject's character, opinions and attitudes. For example, Gwen Forsyth's son Alan recalled that when the Esplanade Kiosk first opened, his mother was asked to wait on tables, which she did, without success. I refashioned the anecdote, drawing on dialogue provided by Alan Forsyth:

Gwen Forsyth willingly scraped the floor with a shovel, and was even prepared to clean out toilets, but she was reluctant to wait on tables. 'I will do anything except waiting,' she said.

'Come on,' another woman cajoled, 'we need everybody who is able to help.'

'I'll never make a good waitress,' Gwen insisted.

The other women prevailed upon her until she relented. Her first customer ordered a meat pie and sauce. Returning with her customer's meal, Gwen tripped. The pie flew into his lap.

'You will never do this again,' the other women quickly informed her. (Tognini, 2012, p. 52)

Description, place and historical Context

A key to convincing narration is relevant, telling detail. When writing about a living person I was sometimes able to return to an event, asking the subject for further information, such as the shape and colour of a room, the clothing she wore, or how she felt. Even so, details were often elusive and told in broader brush strokes of the experience. The task was even more difficult when writing about someone who has passed away. When Major-General Charles Lloyd and Bishop McKie arrived at Jessie Vasey's home with the news of her husband's death I conclude that she 'appeared calm, but later broke down' (Tognini, 2012, p. 18) because of information in *General Vasey's War* by David Horner (1992, p. 323), but I do not have access to further information about her actions, emotional state or physical surroundings.

Although a writer has limited access to the past, it is possible to create a sense of place. In *City of Light*, Gregory (2003) states that 'the characters in each story are like actors on a stage' and that the city 'should be viewed as a stage on which the lives of its citizens are acted out' (p. xiii). While the Guild headquarters has moved several times since 1946, it was in Perth's city centre until in 2003, when a new administration centre was built at Forsyth Gardens in Menora. Between 1946 and 2003, then, the Guild's stage was Perth's city centre—Lord Street, The Esplanade, Bazaar Terrace, St Georges Terrace, Adelaide Terrace Hay Street, in buildings such as Anzac House, The Esplanade Kiosk and Durham House. Where possible I provide details about streets, buildings, and development in the city. For example:

The Perth CBD, where the Guild had been based since the early days of its establishment, was in the process of being modernised. Not everybody saw it as a positive development. The original verandahs on most buildings had already been removed, although opposition to the forced removal of those on the prestigious Esplanade hotel succeeded in saving them. (Tognini, 2012, p. 79)

Historical context can contribute to a sense of place and an understanding of the era in which the war widows lived, so that we better appreciate their trials and decisions. McKernan (2008) incorporates individuals' stories alongside major historical events. His prologue opens on Father's Day, 3 September 1939, with Prime Minister Menzies announcing that Australia is at war. McKernan then provides an overview of the events leading up to Menzies' announcement, before introducing an individual family

and its response (pp. xx–xxi). As a result, we see various facets of Australia’s participation and their impact on a personal level.

To provide a historical context for the Guild’s activities, I gathered information from newspapers, parliamentary records, Heritage Council documents, autobiographies, biographies and other histories (see list of references). Although few war histories mention war widows, they do provide useful background information, as do several organisational histories. Personal narratives such as *Olive Weston: The Heroic Life of a World War Nurse* by Peter Fenton (2003) and *If This Should be Farewell: A Family Separated by War: the Journal and Letters of Ernest and Mary Hodgkin 1942–45* by Adrian Wood (2003) provide insight into how women dealt with separation during the Second World War and domestic life in the post-war period. On *the Home Front* (1996b), edited by Jenny Gregory, provides valuable understanding of a range of Australian events and issues during the Second World War. Gregory’s *City of Light* (2003) was particularly helpful for its knowledge of post-war Perth. For example, *City of Light* reveals that at the time the War Widows’ Guild closed the Esplanade Kiosk business was also lacklustre elsewhere in the city centre, coffee houses had become more popular at the expense of tea rooms and some banks had opened their own cafeterias (p. 65). This information, in addition to details provided by the War Widows’ Guild 1960–61 annual report, suggests that the kiosk’s financial woes were not a result of incompetence or lack of business acumen. Furthermore, efficient referencing meant that I was able to locate, for my own research purposes, Gregory’s original sources, whether newspaper reports, journal articles, archival records or other histories.

The historical context, gleaned from a wide range of sources, forms the third thread of the history of the War Widows’ Guild, although this has been done with a light touch due, in part, to the word constraints of the thesis. This thread may be developed further before the history is published, although state executive officer Jenny Knight and state president Hazel Donald have indicated they are satisfied with the balance because the included information is relevant to the Guild, while remaining focused on the organisation and its members.

Conclusion

Writing a history, whether about an organisation or otherwise, is never a straightforward task. Rather than simply recording what happened, an understanding of the various issues and debates about writing history is necessary. It is essential to consider not only what sources to use, but how those sources have been constructed, for what purpose, and in which context. History is not objective, nor can it be exhaustive. All history is a matter of discourse, selection and arrangement to some degree, and there will always be gaps that could be filled given more time and space. I have recently conducted two more interviews, three years after embarking on the project and with much of the history drafted, one with the son of Rose Heath, the inaugural manager of the Esplanade Kiosk, the other with 95-year-old Peggy Litchfield (formerly Walker), who was the Guild's weaving instructor from 1948 to 1949. These two women had key roles in the Guild's early years, and I relished learning more about them. Furthermore, while the War Widows' Guild has placed few limits on content or style, there has been, and continues to be, open communication about the research and drafting process. The writing, then, continues to be in process until the Guild decides the manuscript is ready to be published. In writing this history of the War Widows' Guild in Western Australia, I have gathered information about the activities, struggles and achievements of the War Widows' Guild and woven that together with individual stories and a historical context. Each thread contributes to the larger piece, helping to provide a new perspective and extend understanding of our post-war history. Being aware that all history is a partial representation, it is my hope that the final draft will tell a story that is faithful to the 'fragmented, frustrated record'.

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